

Technology upgrades in the works

By DEANNA LEE-SHERMAN - Staff Writer

The Harlan County School System has begun what will become a massive distribution of upgraded computer workstations to each of its 11 schools in the coming months, thanks to statewide initiatives supported by lawmakers.

More than 50 Dell computer workstations have been delivered to Cumberland High School and Black Mountain Elementary School, and county school officials are preparing for another delivery at Green Hills Elementary today.

Overall, more than 500 computers will be replacing outdated ones at each of the district's 11 schools as part of the Kentucky Education Network (KEN) project, a two-year endeavor with the goal of providing network communication improvements to each of Kentucky's 175 school districts.

The General Assembly last year backed the initiative with \$50 million for workstation device replacement, called the Instructional Device Upgrade (IDU), and another \$29 million to establish a broadband circuit for each school district.

Of the \$50 million allotted, \$172,781 is available for Harlan County for 2007 and 2008. The delivery of computers statewide began in January and will continue through June 2008, but county school officials are predicting an earlier completion date here.

David Burkhart, director of education technology for the county school system, said each school will receive about 50 new computers - some more or less, depending on need.

"We're moving in the direction of online testing, and this will enhance services by getting all of this in place," Burkhart said.

Burkhart said the upgraded components of the new computers will provide some of the latest technology available to students, and an added plus is that classroom computer access will be expanded by utilizing some of the existing computers being removed from school labs.

"KDE (Kentucky Department of Education) would like to see at least a few computers in each classroom," Burkhart said.

The faculty at Black Mountain made use of the 30 existing computers that were replaced with 30 workstations on Tuesday. Though outdated technologically, they can still be used for portfolio typing and some research, said Travis Moore, the school's technology coordinator and laboratory teacher.

And at Cumberland High School, 10 of the outdated computers replaced last Thursday are still being used in other areas of the school. All schools will be receiving about 25 computers as part of the district's first round of funding, and approximately 25 more during the next round.

"They're already excited. Coming down the hallway, they want to stop and look in," Moore said of the students at Black Mountain.

"The kids get excited over these new computers," added Kevin Farley, a network technician with the school district who helped deliver and set up the workstations on Tuesday.

Rosspoint and Cawood elementaries are scheduled for deliveries next, Burkhart said, and outdated computers that can no longer be utilized in schools will be deemed surplus property.

Burkhart said the installation of a broadband circuit at the school district's central office, which will extend high-speed Internet services to each school, is scheduled for late May. Fourteen

other school districts already have broadband circuits in place, he said, and it's the state's goal to have at least 92 districts fitted by July.

Burkhart said broadband services currently available at the school district's central office are "not considered broadband by today's standards," explaining the district has a "garden hose" compared to what would be a "fire hose" of bandwidth.

"We have noticeable slowdowns now because we're overusing our available bandwidth. Getting broadband in here is a major thing, but we'll need the help of our local service providers to get it to each school," said Burkhart. He said there are some concerns about getting broadband services to the schools in Cumberland and Evarts due to population sparsity in those areas.

The school district has three service providers, including Windstream Communications, BellSouth and TDS Telecom. Windstream would provide the services for Cumberland and Evarts, while BellSouth would serve Rosspoint, Hall, Wallins and Cawood elementaries. Green Hills Elementary falls under TDS Telecom, and James A. Cawood High School would be connected through the central office.

Lisa Gross, spokeswoman for the Kentucky Department of Education, said the additional bandwidth infrastructure required for the installation of KEN "requires that most of the 18 Kentucky Information Highway (KIH) providers throughout the state upgrade or improve their existing telecommunications equipment."

"We have not heard that there have been major difficulties in this area," Gross said.

Burkhart explained that while the state's initiative is to establish a broadband circuit for its school districts, each of those districts are responsible for extending broadband services to schools. He expects those services to be available to at least half of the county's schools by this summer.

When the project is completed, Burkhart said, students will have access to Internet2, a strictly educational Web site that provides more security to children online. He also noted that fiberoptic cable is already in place for the new Harlan County High School, scheduled to open in 2008.